

**POSSIBILITIES IN A PANDEMIC; MATTHEW 21:1-11; PALM/PASSION SUNDAY,  
APRIL 5, 2020; THOAMS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

Andrew Cuomo says you can't win a war by fighting catchup battles but by getting ahead of the enemy and taking the fight to him. He says in this war with the coronavirus we've been playing catchup; and we are climbing a mountain that will peak when we hit the maximum number of cases and deaths.

That's where we have to be waiting, not catching up, not with troops but with enough ICU rooms, ventilators and an army of doctors and nurses.

One thing this pandemic has done is to expose our weaknesses and flaws. For people in a high-tech society who like to have things organized, under control, and convenient we're forced to admit and confront the fact that we may not be as accomplished as we think we are.

Isn't it odd that amid all the increased empowerment that we enjoy in modern life—our myriad of labor-saving devices, our technological advances that enable us to retrieve and process more and more information—isn't it odd that we still feel impotent and unable to fix the problems that most challenge us.

There's a poignant scene from the series *The Crown* in which Prince Philip is mesmerized by the Apollo moon shot. He is at midlife and beginning to ask deeper questions about the meaning of existence. Surely these astronauts who summoned the courage to fly to and walk on the moon saw things, *felt things* that would answer some of his questions.

But when the American astronauts come to Buckingham Palace and have a private audience with the Prince all they appear capable of talking about are the physical and technical challenges. The Prince's attempts to discover what they learned about the meaning of life fall flat.

Life gets so busy it takes a crisis, a pandemic to slow us down long enough to force us to let go of lesser priorities and listen to the bedrock longings and wonderments in our hearts—the kind of contemplation that our busy week days and task-driven weekends do not usually allow time for.

So here we are on a pandemic Sunday; worshipping online, on the Sunday the church remembers Jesus making his much-anticipated entry into the Holy City. It is an odd spectacle: the itinerant rabbi bouncing along on the back of a rented donkey, the crowd making a fanfare of the occasion.

Of all places he goes to the Temple first, where he throws out the money-changers and purifies that sacred space. Today's story starts on the Mt. of Olives where the prophet said God would wage a final, climatic battle that would establish a new order and the story ends here at the Temple, the place of Israel's deliverance and hope.

In this COVID crisis, the Holy Week events we just heard in two triptychs of readings strip away our disguises, reveal who we are, who God is and can't come soon enough.

People are dying so fast in metro New York the morgues are full and they're storing bodies in refrigerated trailers. Buffalo is next says the *Washington Post*.

The most powerful, affluent, advanced nation on earth unable to properly care for its dead. If ever there was a time to question who we are, how we got here and who and where is God, it is now.

When Jesus rides into Jerusalem today, he exposes a bankrupt religious system and impotent military / industrial empire.

Matthew's choice of the Mt. of Olives to begin Holy Week heralds the replacement of the present \ order with a new order; and Jesus' cleansing of the Temple where God's deliverance of his people from Pharaoh and darkness was remembered in the annual ritual sacrifice of a lamb, proclaims the impending sacrifice of God's own son that will bring *new hope and deliverance* to all the human family.

Today's entrance to the city is the prelude to the final confrontation and violence, the long-predicted show down between good and evil. The arrest, the betrayal, the trial, the rejection for a common thief, the condemnation to the cross, and the execution itself appear this morning to win this epic struggle for the forces of death, brute force, cunning deception, and religious and secular laws used to protect power.

But the story is not over, even on the cross. As his family mourns and his followers suffer in the bile of their regret and remorse, the cosmic drama continues to unfold. What sets it in motion when the spirit hovered over the waters at the beginning of time, and now launches the creation of a new order when this backwater rabbi literally turns the other cheek, gives the cloak off his back and walks the Via dolorosa to his death...

what sets the making of this new world and reality in motion is the presence of a power defined not as strength but what the world calls weakness; not a response of retaliation as the world would make but of forgiveness injected like a powerful vaccine into the contagion of the world's fear and aggression.

What we witness in these readings today is the last gasp of a world ruled by death that presumes itself victorious, but will soon discover itself claimed by this power to lay itself down for others and pray even for enemies.

The message in today's story is that the Creator of the Universe enters our world to defeat the forces of fear that pride, greed, envy, anger, and lust feed upon; this is good news that the Holy One of Israel comes to shake things up; to get personal; to call us back to life; even as a voice called the prodigal son back to himself.

This is a voice stronger than the demons of anxiety and loneliness, a voice stronger than nagging doubt and gnawing despair, stronger than guilt and fear and addiction. This is a voice stronger than the demons that plague and feed us husks when we turn away from the One who gives and sustains life.

This is the voice not of a distant, watchmaker God, but a personal savior, a shepherd who searches even for a single lost sheep. A God who comes to rescue you and me. Take heart in the midst of this medical and spiritual pandemic – help is on the way. Amen.